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The SS19 Loophole

A reading of the fine print in the SALT II treaty after it went to the Senate has revealed, to the horror of supporters of the arms-control pact, an uncanny repetition of the worst U.S. blooper in the 1972 SALT I treaty.

The 1972 mistake, not discovered until long after ratification, failed to pin down specific limits on the size of a replacement for the SS11 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Now, in a new negotiating blooper discovered as the Senate ratification debate begins, SALT II does not clearly define the size of Moscow's mainstay SS19 ICBM, which it sets as the limit on the size of any new missiles.

That history should be so sadly replayed is explicable only by this fact: The Russians simply refused to agree on a specific definition of the size of the SS19. This adds new evidence that U.S. negotiators, under orders from Washington for an agreement at almost any cost, bowed to the iron will of their Soviet counterparts.

Ironically, the 1979 mistake occurred in an effort to correct the effect of the 1972 negotiating blunder. By failing to pin down the size of the new Soviet ICBMs, SALT I contributed to the vulnerability of land-based U.S. missiles. Limiting future Russian ICBMs to the size of the SS19 is an effort to protect the land-based U.S. missile force.

But if there was no agreement on the size of the SS19, how can Moscow legally be held to the terms of the treaty?

The answer: It cannot, any more than it could be forced to comply with the clear understanding of limits on "new" missiles in the 1972 treaty, negotiated by Henry Kissinger.

Kissinger relied, to his later dismay, on

what he called the "safeguard" of Soviet assurance "that no missiles larger than the heaviest light missile that now exists can be substituted." In 1972, that was the SS11. But after SALT I took effect, the SS11 was replaced by the SS19, which was almost three times as big.

President Carter's negotiators retraced Kissinger's slippery footsteps, relying on their own understanding of the size of the SS19. The Soviets typically refused to agree or disagree with the U.S. definition.

The State Department virtually admits that it could not nail down the Soviets. Its "detailed analysis" of the treaty, sent to all senators, spells out this country's position: the United States "considers" the SS19 to have a launch-weight (weight in the silo) of 90,000 kilograms and a throw-weight (weight of the warheads) of 3,600 kilograms. These are key measurements of size.

"These figures are based on our estimate for the SS19," the senators were told. "The Soviet Union did not respond to this statement [but] the United States will regard these figures as the limits for the one new type of ... ICBM permitted to the United States."

But will the Russians? Realists here doubt it, anymore than in 1972. Kissinger learned the hard truth slowly, as U.S. monitors in Iran began to accumulate data on the true size of the new SS19 being tested to replace the old SS11.

Trapped by Soviet duplicity three years later, Kissinger found himself lamely explaining away the sudden appearance of the big SS19. "We obviously did not know in 1972 what missiles the Soviet Union would be testing in 1974," Kissinger told a State Department press conference on Dec. 9, 1973.

But there was no way to stop SS19 development. Moscow blithely kept insisting its new missile was just a slightly updated model of the old SS11. Now, following SALT II, the Russians have a loophole to sustain their own version of a "legal" follow-on missile to the SS19 by claiming that the U.S. definition of the SS19's size is simply wrong, and that Moscow never agreed to it.

This would not come up if the Russians played fair and square. But they play to win; they take advantage of whatever opportunity is granted.

Discovery of Soviet deception on the SS19 by the Nixon-Ford administration long after SALT I took effect depended on America's ally, Iran. But the true size of the SS19 almost certainly would have eluded U.S. intelligence for even longer had it not been for U.S. monitoring stations in northern Iran, just south of the main Soviet test range.

Those stations no longer exist, and the United States is not close to duplicating them. This enhances the strong probability that the one new Soviet missile permitted under the treaty will not only greatly exceed limits set forth by U.S. negotiators but also that the Soviets will not reveal its full launch-weight and throw-weight until it has been tested repeatedly—ready to enter the Soviet missile force.

This undermines the SALT-sellers' argument that the treaty, while not accomplishing all that much, does no harm. On the contrary, this new revelation of non-Yankee bargaining suggests that the Soviet Union, under SALT II as under SALT I, will loophole its way to nuclear supremacy while Americans play by the rules.

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